

Pulitzer Prize winner Malamud makes short shrift of voice shifts

The Stories of Bernard Malamud
by Bernard Malamud
Collins, 350 pp., \$23.95.

By KEVIN CONNOLLY

Until recently, the short story had acquired only peripheral critical attention in North America, perhaps because of the "popular" nature of the art form, or simply because of prevailing literary fashions. *The Stories of Bernard Malamud*, a collection of some two dozen works, provides ample evidence that such neglect is unfair, and continues a recent tradition of excellence that is lending well-deserved attention to both Canadian and American short fiction writers.

Malamud, a Jewish American, is a Pulitzer Prize winner and has given equal time to short fiction and the novel for most of his writing life. This volume includes a short but insightful preface by the author in which he discusses the merits and attractions of the short story genre. Here Malamud openly admits his preference for the short story, citing it as the best way for a young writer to be heard, while learning to deal with the formal constraints of his craft.

"... a good short story portrays the complexity of life while producing the immediate effect of knowledge."
—Bernard Malamud

"Writing the short story, if one has the gift, is a good way to begin writing seriously. It demands form as it teaches it, although I've met some who would rather not be taught. They say that the demands of form interfere with the freedom to express themselves. But no good writer writes only as he pleases. ... I'm for freedom of thought, but one must recognize that it doesn't always lead to art. Free thought may come close to self-deceit."

Malamud sees form as the basis of all literature, and restricts his experimentation to very strictly defined parameters. Freedom of thought and experimentation are fine as long as they don't "intrude or interfere with the logic of language and construction," says Malamud.

In this collection we are treated to a wide variety of themes and styles, all given scope and impact by virtue of their clearly structured formal limitations. Yet Malamud is difficult to tie down—even within his heavily formalized prose he finds plenty of room for innovation.

In "My Son the Murderer," Malamud takes an old theme, a communication gap between a father and his son, and uses an interesting set of stylistic techniques to give it life. The dialogue

is all incorporated into the body of the prose, making multiple shifts in narrative focus possible:

At night I watch the news programs. I watch the war from day to day. It's a big burning war on a small screen. It rains bombs and the flames roar higher. Sometimes I lean over and touch the war with the flat of my hand. I wait for my hand to die.

My son with the dead hand.

I expect to be drafted every day but it doesn't bother me the way it used to. I won't go. I'll go to Canada or somewhere else I can go.

The way he is frightens my wife and she is glad to go to my daughter's house every morning to take care of the three children. I stay with him in the house but he don't talk to me. You ought to call up Harry and talk to him, my wife says to my daughter.

I will sometime but don't forget there's nine years difference between our ages. I think he thinks of me as another mother around and one is enough. I used to like him when he was a little boy but now it's hard to deal with someone who won't reciprocate to you.

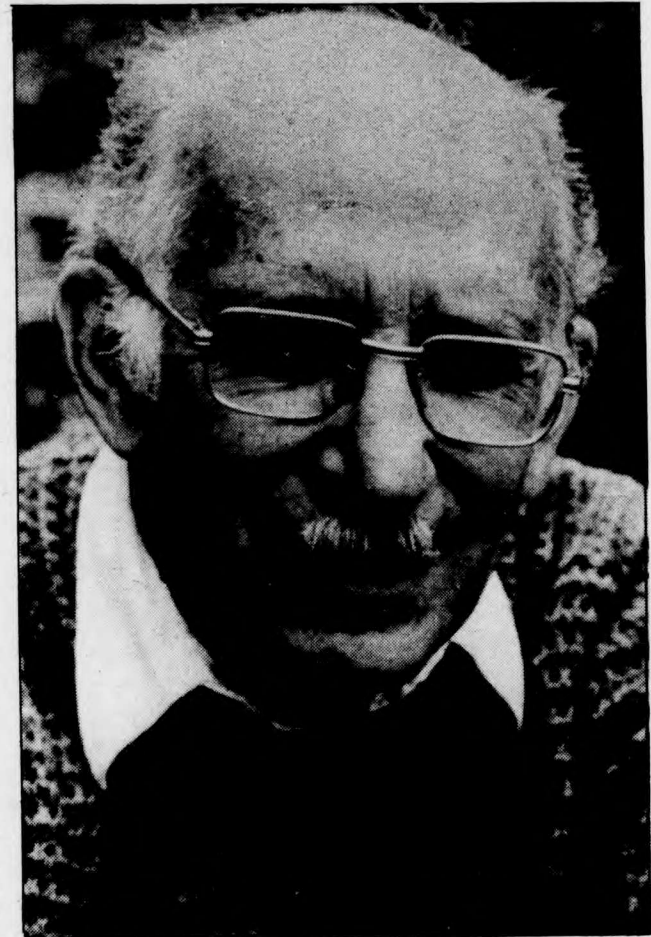
She's got high blood pressure, I think she's afraid.

There are no less than six shifts in voice in this one short passage. The result is an ambiguous point of view that is only slightly mediated by the more frequent shifts to the father. With this device Malamud is able to do some marvelous things with reader sympathy, bringing the minds of all the characters closer to the reader. We experience first hand the depressing isolation of the characters and are led to implicit questions about who or what is responsible for the despair and mutual alienation. Like many of the works this story takes almost stock conflicts and situations and renders them with new emotion and immediacy.

Not all the stories, however, are as successful as this one. "Take Pity," and "The Mourners," which deal with urban angst and the plight of Jewish immigrants, are both a little too dirgeful. Though the characters' problems are no doubt familiar to many people, the situations are not presented in a way that is either believable or experienceable for the reader. Even Malamud's masterful use of dialogue and detail are not able to counterbalance the cliché and the stereotypes.

With the exception of these stories, Malamud's characterization is one of his strong suits. Jewish and European dialects sparkle in the sparse, well-placed segments of dialogue and internal monologue. In "The German Refugee" the personal impact of the Holocaust is given a superb twist as the German intellectual undergoes the torture of learning English in his new country. The psychological turmoil and culture shock help bring the man's past and future into focus for the reader, while the thick German accent adds some brilliant moments of irony.

In most cases it is clear that we are dealing with an author of



Bernard Malamud

almost limitless capability. Even the few poor stories are worthwhile, failing in some ways while remaining interesting in others.

In Malamud's words, a good short story "packs a self in a few pages, predicating a lifetime. The drama is tense, happens fast, and is more often than not outlandish. In a few pages a good short story portrays the complexity of life while producing the immediate surprise and effect of knowledge." Perhaps the best thing one can say about this collection is that, for the most part, it lives up to the author's ambitious criteria. In tone, style and sheer verbal grace the stories are highly reminiscent of O. Henry; the conclusions sudden, innovative, and eminently satisfying. One of a few recent publications that might be worth the outrageous cover price.

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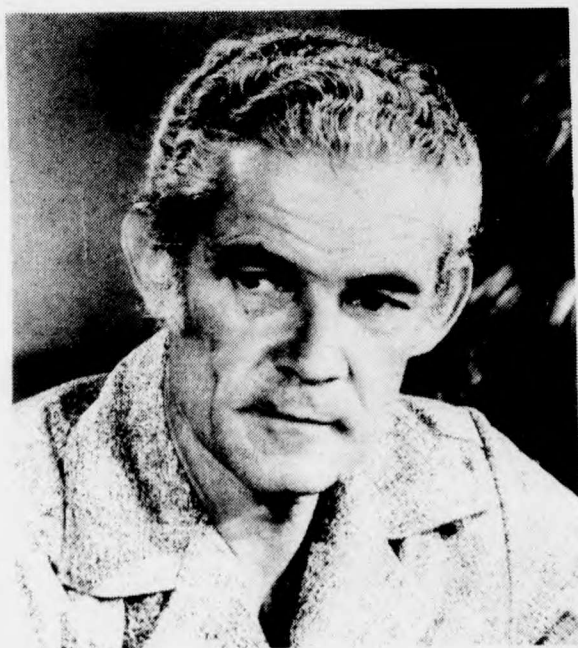
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